

The Death of Ordinariness: Living, Learning, and Relating in the Age of Anxiety

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Abstract:

On September 11, 2001, ordinariness died. In its place, a new anxiety was born. In this personal story of anxiety and response, the author reflects on events as they have unfolded in the days following September 11. Focusing on the possibilities invoked by anxiety, the author also questions the limits of anxiety. Can anxiety be both a springboard and a ceiling of possibility? In the Age of Anxiety, we may need to rethink our relationships with anxiety, learning, and one another. Events such as those of September 11 may well force us to question how everyday life is changed by interruption, disruption, and anxiety and then to question how anxiety might be extended and used to spark our collective creativity.

Article:

THE AGE OF ANXIETY

On September 11, 2001, something died.

It wasn't just people.

On September 11, 2001, *ordinariness* died.

On September 12, a day into this shattering, shivering ordeal, I get up, as if everything is normal. I shake my head, wondering if I have been dreaming. I turn on the television, just to see if it really happened. News reports only; no breaks, no commercials. It happened all right.

As I drive to work, a tear wells up, seemingly out of nowhere. I wonder, What will happen to us? What will be the fate of the soul of humanity?

As I drive along in light traffic, on my way to the office, I ponder this new world we have been thrust into. Will the grief one day subside, as I know it has in the past? Will anxiety quicken and thicken until we can no longer stand it? What will we do, now that our president's plane has landed and America has been called into action? What exactly will we sow in the world, now that we have reaped this horror?

I wonder. . . .

"I'm shocked out of my shoes," my neighbor said.

"Speechless," said another.

"Scared to death," a third.

"Pissed," said another.

I remember other times in my lifetime when we felt this way. When thinking about events like these, we place ourselves in a story.

Where were you when JFK was shot?

I was five years old, but I remember clearly the crowd around the television in my house, one of the few TVs owned by the students at the seminary where my dad was studying.

How about Martin?

RFK?

John?

An ordinary January day, 1986.... I am standing at work, reading a report indicating how busy we are. This is my second corporate job out of college. I am a floor supervisor in a busy customer service call center. A light that helps us track how many calls are coming in flashes frenetically on the wall, showing more than a hundred calls holding. Phones ring; service representatives answer. And then, suddenly, all is stone cold still, eerily quiet. No ringing, no flashing. Heads “prairie dog” up from the cubicles. What’s going on? And then a manager appears, tells us, “The Challenger exploded on take-off. We’re setting up a television in the break room.” She leaves. We stand, staring around at one another, struck mute, horrified.

Remember the first World Trade Center disaster?

Oklahoma City?

Columbine?

Where were you?

What’s your story?

In every case I can think of, that great machine, the purveyor of news and entertainment and story that came into our homes—became the center of many homes in the 1950s—draws us under its spell. We seek the TV the way cave dwellers must have sought the campfire, the way Linus searches for his blanket on wash day.

Security. Story. Sense.

This time, as the shock gradually dissipates, we begin talking: family, friends, neighbors, colleagues. Stories unfold, as they did on those other fateful, horrifying days.

I have a friend who was in the Capitol building when the Pentagon was hit. He was set to testify before a congressional committee. Suddenly, hundreds of people were being evacuated from every government building in the area. But for many, there was no designated place to go to. My friend was simply told to “get as far away from the center of town as possible.” He emerged to gridlock on the streets of Washington and to no available cabs anyway. So he and several others walked-jogged-ran, ties flapping in the wind, to Georgetown. They huddled in a corner pub, watched events unfold on CNN.

As the days go by, we swap stories, and we begin to talk about what it all means. It seems to many of us—to me and my friends and my colleagues and my neighbors—that we stand at a turning point in human history. We are in a new era. The threshold to this new era began to be constructed as the great wars of the twentieth century—the world wars and the cold war—unfolded. But those wars were comprehensible. We knew our enemy; we had

a foe we could identify. Then came Vietnam, and comprehension began to slip. Now comes the “war on terror.” This “war” and our foe are hard to define. Ambiguity rules.

On September 11, 2001, as the towers collapsed, ordinariness itself collapsed. We Americans were all stunned, lost; our human finitude—the fragile ephemerality of life itself—was suddenly “in our face.” Our ordinary lives, and the sense of security our ordinary daily routines bring us, have, in a blinding flash and a searing explosion, been vaporized. What had been a comfortable, perhaps even complacent, existence, was, in that flash, morphed into a painful puzzle. In the interruption, we searched for something that would help us make sense. But what we found was a strange new world, a fragmented world of hurt and anger and pain, of sadness and questioning and fear!

We were thrust into something no one among us wanted but all had to accept. Anxiety descended like a dark cloud. In the weeks since, it has been hard to fend off despair, with daily reports of possible targets, anthrax scares and various threats, FBI warnings, talk of war and terror filling the air.

I have heard several symbolic interpretations of the structure of the now-vanished World Trade Center since it fell. One is that they formed the vertical bars of a dollar sign, that this attack was thus an attack on the Almighty Dollar. Another is that they stood, simply and starkly, as the gateway to the American Dream, a dream of unprecedented, audacious, and freewheeling prosperity. And a third: That if you tilted your head sideways, they looked like an “equal” sign, representing the grand notions of equality—equal access, equal opportunity, equal freedoms—that underpin the American Dream.

I am not sure what to make of these interpretations.

I only know that, where those towers stood, there is now a (symbolic?) hole, wider and deeper than the buildings were. And I know that, somewhere in the rubble partially filling the hole are the dust and ashes that were once thousands of living, breathing human beings.

I know that there are an awful lot of children who no longer have fathers or mothers.

I know of many mothers and fathers who have lived through the unthinkable. No one believes that they should or will outlive their children, much less that they should or will endure the unspeakable horror of facing the senseless, brutal murder of their children.

I know that there are siblings and grandparents and cousins and dear, dear friends who are lost to us all.

I also know that symbols have sprouted like wildflowers in the North Carolina spring. Antenna flags are de rigueur. Red, white, and blue ... even Christmas lights have taken on these patriotic hues. Ribbons and songs and banners and billboards ... all attempts to make response possible, to make sense out of nonsense, to resurrect a shred of hope from the pit of Ground Zero Despair.

Our ordinary old world has been shattered. Beyond the ordinary ambiguity of postmodernity, we now live in the age of extraordinary anxiety. And with the death of the ordinary, we find ourselves examining our taken-for-granted assumptions about life on this planet.

We Americans have, until September, lived in a privileged space in the life-world. We have taken our prosperity, our strength, our safety, our security, and our ordinary workaday lives, as givens. While the rest of the world has lived with terrorism for many long years, we have largely ignored the growing threat, shielding ourselves from the stark realities of discontent among those who do not share our privilege.

Now we find ourselves in need of new ways of navigating and negotiating our world. What should we do now? How should we face the threat? And how, exactly, should we respond to our president’s suggestion that we

calmly return to the business at hand? How do we live out our (no longer ordinary) daily lives and their roles, all the while fully aware of the ever-present danger and the anxiety that danger provokes?

ANXIETY AND RESPONSE

I wake up trembling. At first, I think the ground is shaking. I have never lived in an active earthquake zone, but my first thought is that an earthquake must be happening. It feels as if the earth is shaking. But I quickly realize it's just me. *I* am shaking, a tear streaming down my cheek.

Bad dream. Really bad dream.

It's usually just a brief flash, invading my consciousness, often at the end of another, seemingly unrelated dream. Then a cold sweat breaks out around my neck, and I awake, shivering.

And then I stand up to face another day.

As the early morning fog slowly lifts, I remember parts of the dream. I am standing, looking out the window of a tall building. It reminds me of my old 24th-floor office in downtown Denver. As I gaze out at the peaceful mountains in the distance, I spot an airplane. Suddenly, the plane turns toward me, and I realize it is *aiming* at me. I jump out of bed, look out my bedroom window, pondering, shivering, searching for an airplane.

Anxious, fearful, shaken.

It is more than two months now since that September day when the earth shook, but I find I cannot shake the feeling of impending doom.

I had a physical exam the other day. For the first time, I have a blood pressure reading in the "high" range.

The doctor says one word: "Anxiety." He lifts his voice a little as he pronounces the final syllable of the word. Is it a question? "Anxiety?" The ambiguity there makes me anxious.

So I have twin gifts arising from the ashes of the twin towers. There is blood pressure. And there are the dreams, always the dreams.

I am haunted by my dreams.

My wife Sue has a different form of anxiety response. Every night at midnight she rises, frustrated in her attempts to find sleep, and sits on the couch watching CNN. How can anyone sleep through this? Even as I am haunted by the gifts of my sleeping unconscious, she is haunted by the impossibility of sleep. She finally turns in around 4 a.m., only to rise to meet the day two hours later. The effects of sleep deprivation are starting to show as she loses track of daily tasks, suffers short-term memory loss, and responds curtly to other humans she encounters. Her doctor said it too: "Anxiety?"

In early October, almost exactly one month after the tragedy, Sue flew through Chicago on her way to Denver. As the plane took off from O'Hare, it turned over Lake Michigan and followed the Chicago skyline, passing not too far from the Sears Tower. That tower had a new meaning that day, as she gripped the armrest. "All I see is water and buildings"—the quote echoed in her mind. Apparently, a passenger on one of those fateful New York flights left a desperate message on her home answering machine moments before the plane was engulfed in flames. And there was Sue, a month later, flying over water, near buildings. These days, once-ordinary events take on extraordinary meanings.

And now anxiety arises, daily, just as we do. But we must remember: Anxiety is anything but ordinary. Anxiety is an interruption, a shattering of our routines, a disruption. Anxiety is a force that disrupts daily life and causes

us to reorient ourselves to our world. Now we are reoriented, to what once was an ordinary date on a calendar: 9/11.

Every day, as I try to recover the ordinary—as I eat, work out, shower, write, teach, talk, sleep—at some point my mind travels back to 9/11.

Interruption, uncertainty, anxiety.... I stood, frozen, in front of the television in my office, watching the horror reproduced. Time and again since that day, the image of the plane going into the tower has been played. The image is etched into my memory forever. In one reel, a man is sitting in the foreground, enjoying his morning latte. He looks up, yells, and runs, as flames erase people.

Ordinary time/routine/progress was shattered that day as the towers of ordinariness and routine crumbled. Anxiety has intruded. We are in its grip. For a time, we were frozen in our tracks, stuck, mute, horrified. Then, slowly, we gathered ourselves and tried to go on. I have wanted to shake off the anxiety, wanted to just be “normal” again. And yet, there is a certain force, a power to that anxiety—a force that has begun, over time, to present me with a new set of possibilities.

In the tradition of existential phenomenology, anxiety serves as a turning point. The interruption occurs, and choices appear. In a flash, as the realization of human finitude descends into everyday awareness, the ultimate choice confronts me: Despair or Faith, Sickness or Health, Death or Life. I am filled with anxiety, even (sometimes) dread.

And yet, anxiety may not represent a force to be avoided or eliminated. Seeking a therapeutic solution is, though certainly applauded by our culture, called into question. It is not therapy per se that we need.

It's not that therapy is bad. It's just that therapy cannot accomplish what we might be tempted to ask of it—that it relieve the anxiety permanently. And there is another danger in putting too much stock in a therapeutic “solution.” That danger lies in the possibility of self-absorption at a time when we may need to be other-oriented.

But there is something else, too—something that may be a gift or a byproduct of therapy but that operates beneath the surface of “cure.” Anxiety calls for healing and creation and possibility, not cure.

That's the gift of the mad Dane Kierkegaard: the leap beyond Despair . . . into possibility!

Possibility! Ah! I think I understand! Or do I? Wait? What, exactly, is possibility? Is it not the opening that beckons to us, that calls us to go on, even in the face of Despair? Is it not the Infinity that awaits us as we author (coauthor?) a life? Is it not what Paul Tillich called “the courage to be” in spite of/in response to the anxiety that threatens to engulf and overwhelm us?

What gives me “possibility” in my life? For many in this stream of thinking—most notably, perhaps, Kierkegaard (1980), Marcel (1960), and Tillich (1952)—possibility is evoked in the world of human community.

COMMUNITY AND FAMILY

On September 12, 2001, we gather at the fountain of my university, to commemorate, to give voice to a community response to the tragic events of 9/11. A fine Carolina-blue sky belies the cloud of dusty-smoky angst that has descended upon us. Hundreds of us encircle our protected campus center-space. We stand together, quietly, wondering what will come next. We come together, uncertain of what we need, but knowing nonetheless that coming together is necessary. We could not come together. There are some things in life that simply must be done. Faculty members, administrators, and students speak publicly and reverently about our shock, our grief, our dismay, and our hopes for the future. As we quietly return to our offices and our class-

rooms, not one of us knows what will come next. Yet, somehow, we know that the work we are doing here still matters, that teaching and learning must continue.

And we know this: We do it *together*, because that is the only way to do it that makes sense. We gather to teach and to learn, to explore our human commonality, our alterity, our knowledge, and our possibility.

I think it is the people in my life who offer me an opening to possibility. Anxiety intrudes . . . and I search for relation.

On the day of the attacks, my first instinct was to gather with my family. As soon as we could, we met in my mom's kitchen. And we all told our stories of the day. We told our stories because we had to; we are story-making animals.

We spoke our lives into Being during those moments around the kitchen table. We spoke of where we were when we first learned of the horror. We tried, collectively, to make sense of it all. To tell our stories seemed so natural, so right. So we sat together, spinning our tales, reaching for that special understanding that is the gift of the story.

A key part of our common human story is this: family. The family has a structure that gives us life and love and community and communication. That structure gives us rules and roles and ways of seeing ourselves that no other social structure gives. In our culture—in this newly-reunited/nervous/ proud/sad/defiant United States of America—that structure in all its forms and all its varied definitions is somehow at the center of who we are.

Late on the afternoon of September 12, I walk through the front door of our new home. It is good to be home. We have lived here for six weeks, just long enough for me to start feeling comfortable in my new job as assistant professor at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. And now this. We have left our long-time community in Denver behind us for now. As I enter this place that is now my home, I ponder how hard it is to build community in a new place. After twenty years in Denver, we had people we could rely on. We belonged. We were connected. It is hard to leave that behind, and try, somehow, to re-create it in a new place. And now this. How to build community in a shattered world?

I find Sue, standing in the kitchen, staring into the soup she is cooking. She does that when she's anxious. When all else fails, cook soup. A tear trickles down her cheek as she turns, sensing my presence. She doesn't speak, but she moves toward me. We embrace. I offer her my caress, as she offers hers. We will get through this, together. And we know: This is the meaning of family. We are deeply related.

Family.... I find myself thinking about it a lot these days. What is the essence of family? What does it mean?

When my sons were born, now some years ago, I was first to hold them. Speaking of interruption, of disruption, and anxiety. . . .

Both were "emergency" births, one a caesarian, the other a "distressed" child-in-crisis. In each case, I was present to cut the cord, which had, until that moment, given them life. And when I looked upon their faces, I was transformed. There is no other experience like this one, no other moment in life so compelling. When I looked upon their faces—in that brief moment when the first spark passed between us—I *knew*. I knew I would sacrifice all else that I know or care about or own or feel for the sake of this One Other. I was ecstatic. In those moments, I witnessed the birth of possibility anew.

And on that strangely surreal afternoon years later, on the day we have come to refer to as *the day after*—on September 12, 2001—my son Eli, now age 10, walked into his room and closed the door. In the period of about an hour, he constructed a weapon. The technology consists of a sheath, worn across his back at a diagonal angle, and a white stick, about three feet in length and made of oak, fitted into the sheath. The stick can be

drawn, ninja-like, for use as a club or a spear or a sword. He now rides his foot-propelled scooter up and down the street in front of our house, weapon slung across his back, ready, patrolling, protecting. He does this daily, as soon as he returns home from school. He has not said a word. Maybe he is trying to do something to fend off the anxiety, or at least to put anxiety to use.

He needs to help, to feel power, to make a move, to respond ... he needs to make a difference. He needs to *matter*.

What should I, as father, do? I am his father, yet I, too, am lost. I do not know what to do for him, how to comfort him, how to help him make sense of the senseless. How do you explain to a ten-year-old something you have no explanation for? What to say, and how?

And yet, there is less ambiguity here than in some relationships; as we move about within the life-worlds shared by small children, we may rely on time-tested roles. The child seeks some comfort; I, as father, offer my love unconditionally. I am ever aware of encroaching anxiety; I hesitate to increase it with my children. Rather, I am their “rock,” the steady one who can offer, if not certainty, at least some sense of stability and protection in an anxiety-engulfed world. I do not know if I am doing the right thing. I only know that I must answer the call that issues forth from the very presence of my children in Being. I only know that, in that call, at least in this instance, I hear a plea for love-as-embrace. So I embrace my children, and my wife, often. I embrace my family, and I am grateful for their presence in my life.

Drawn into communicating, we are often speechless. And yet, we respond to each other, speaking with the words of the body, with gestures of love and caring and connection. Sometimes that is all we have.

And I keep a close eye on them. Eli enters the house, crying. I look him in the eye, and we hold that gaze for a moment. We have always been close; we know each other well. Both of us are scared. We hug each other, tightly, knowing and not knowing, gripped by anxiety and, at the same time, transcending it, if only momentarily, with love.

Whatever happens, we know this: The love flowing between us is powerful. Maybe it is enough. Surely, it is all we have.

And this: Perhaps anxiety has its limits, and we have met them.

On September 15, we gather at Eli’s school for a community-building potluck supper. At the end of the evening, as we walk up the hill toward our cars to head home, a single airplane streaks across the sunset-fired Carolina sky. We all pause, hushed, in awe. A kid points, says, “Hey, look! The first airplane!” The first airplane to fly out of our little airport since that horrible, black Tuesday.

On another day, Eli and I take a bike ride. After a few miles, we sit down on a bench, resting. Words flow forth. Eli starts talking about his feelings of anxiety, about the horror of terrorism, about how the bullies at his school have escalated their acts since September 11, about how the bullies are like terrorists.

And I wonder: How should I respond, how should I comfort him, how should I take my stand in this extraordinary moment?

As father, I stand in a special place in his life. So I call his school and I intervene. At the very least, he should feel as safe as possible in this crazy world. I may not be able to stop the terrorists, but I can do something to stop the bullies at my son’s school. So I call the principal of his school and set into motion a chain of communicative events that leads to the end of the silent reign of terror on the playground.

TO TEACH?

Anxiety. Again: September 11, 2001. I stand before my Persuasion in Western Culture class. I am, for the first time in my career, struck mute. I stand, arms at my sides, silent for a full minute. Although this is a rhetoric class—and the acts of terror which had sent me reeling just a short time ago were clearly rhetorical-symbolic—I find myself at a loss, unable to be truly responsive, incapable of making a single content point or of drawing any sort of meaningful relationship between our study of rhetoric and events out in the world. The anxiety—the deep uncertainty, the dread—are simply too intense. I find myself tilting toward silent Despair.

So, as eloquence fails me, I haltingly tell my students the news. I do not know what to say. “Something horrible has happened,” I say. Then I simply offer the minimal information I have gleaned from early, somewhat sketchy news reports, hastily retrieved from the small television in my office. A student flees the room, tears streaming down her cheeks.¹ Questions—but few answers—hum about the large lecture hall for about fifteen minutes.

Then, 170 people fall silent. There is little more to say. We do not yet know what questions to ask. How do you even frame a dialogue about something that is unlike anything in your previous experience? I reach for the analogues, but I cannot see them right now. How much context do you need before you can discuss the “text?” At the suggestion of several students, many of whom want to go out and learn more, others of whom want to call their families or gather with friends, I dismiss class, but offer to hang around to talk if people want.

A few students mill about the front of the room. One, an Iranian girl, asks me, “Should I be getting in my car and driving out of this country?” A sophisticated question for this suddenly shocked and uncharacteristically inarticulate Ph.D. to try to answer. I babble some attempt at comfort. Another student chimes in, “I don’t think you have to worry.” The Iranian girl does not look reassured.² We talk aimlessly for a few minutes, most of us just wanting to be in the company of fellow humans, I think. I open my office to those who want to learn more from the television. As the day wears on, I find myself needing to retreat and connect with my family. I leave campus, engulfed by a hazy cloud of confusion and emptiness.

The next day, as the time for my Relational Communication class approaches, I find myself unable to concentrate on the day’s lesson. I begin to ask myself some simple but compelling questions: What is the point of my life in the academy? Why am I a scholar-teacher? How might I draw on our collective anxiety and answer what my friend Michael Hyde calls the “call of conscience?”

My students must be asking some questions, too. What will come next? Will we go to war? Will I be drafted? Will/did someone I know and love die?

So, one day after the horror, I open up class by offering the opportunity to simply engage in unstructured dialogue about the anxiety we are experiencing. The dialogue is both solemn and active, engaged and engaging. As we try to make sense of what has happened, emotions run high. We probe and we question; inquiry and a genuine search for understanding are the guiding forces this day. Questioning is the center, but the center does not hold.

Shock, dismay, outrage, fear; we are mostly numb, often silent, sometimes angry, truly sad. Gradually, amid all these contradictory feelings, a desire to do something to help emerges.³ And, as we continue our search, ideas and questions fill the air, but few definitive answers.

We search for analogues in our prior collective experience, to see if we can make sense. Terror: Oklahoma City, Columbine, the previous bombings at the World Trade Center... all are horrific, but all fall short. The magnitude of this attack is staggering, overwhelming the analogues. And those earlier events seem so remote, so small, so *ordinary*, by comparison.

We sense that this time is different, that something has ended, that something else has surely begun. But it is clear that our limited experience, our limited sense of context, limits our inquiry. Still, we press on.

All we can do is inquire ... and interpret. Some students take an immediately patriotic stand; others wonder and question and explore; still others are thoughtfully self-critical.

“Have I personally done enough to thwart violence in this world?” one asks.

“Maybe we should try to figure out why they hate us so much,” chimes in another. The effect of that simple remark is electric.⁴

And then, just as I think we are succeeding in our quest to make sense of this anxiety-bind we have been thrown into, my students surprise me. They ask me to move on—to get back to the study at hand, to continue with our examination of relational communication, and to leave the collective tragedy we are suffering behind for a bit.

What should I do? How can I help to transform this decisive “retreat” into an important moment? Should I challenge the retreat? Or should I honor it? I agonize for a moment.

But I also understand why, perhaps, we all need some distance. We need to retreat. We are on anxiety overload.

We have met the limits of anxiety.

We have met the limits of anxiety, and those limits are us.

We have had all we can stand, for now.

At the outer limits of anxiety, we need the comfort of routine.

Still, this leads me to wonder how to answer the call of conscience that I hear as I stand before the students as “teacher.” What to do, how to engage?

I have noticed, over the years, that often my students seek to define, to contain, to categorize learning:

“Will this be on the test?”

“What will the test be like?”

“Will you give us the answers before the test?”

“How much of this do we have to know?”

“I missed class the other day—did I miss anything important?”

These questions rise up out of something—anxiety perhaps. Fending off anxiety, we engage the drive for the definite, for predictability, for routine.

And I wonder: Am I called to reduce anxiety, or to help put it to good use? Perhaps I, as teacher, should embrace the moment. What is a teacher, really? Am I a purveyor of information? Or am I called to lead a community of learners across a dangerous, anxiety-filled threshold?

After many years as a student myself, I know one thing: Coming to know is an act that requires change, a process that, by its very nature, creates anxiety. So I think that to teach from a space of compassion, responsibility, and commitment, I must draw on the existential anxiety we all share. We move toward knowing via the energy of anxiety, compassion, and the commitment to share our lives, our thoughts, our feelings, our questions, our desires, our interpretations, our dreams, our questions . . . always questions.

As a learning-questioning community, we move, together, beyond anxiety; we spring into new worlds of relating.

Fortuitously, perhaps, the announced subject of class that day is “communicative competence.” So we weave together the contours of competence with our understanding of the communicative moments that are unfolding in response to these events that have so violently disrupted our ordinary understandings of communication and its place in our life-world. We speak of the relative rhetorical competence of the communicators whose primary symbolic act was to destroy. We speak of how we might respond appropriately and competently to the challenge that has been set for us by these Others who have interrupted our lives.

RETURN

December 11, 2001. 8:46 a.m. The nation pauses for a moment of silent remembrance. We mark this occasion with silence because sometimes words fail us, because sometimes silence is the most appropriate response, because sometimes we must go back to the silence that struck us in the beginning.

Silent shock, silent grief, silent reverence.

But silence only goes so far, only comforts us for a time.

So we humans begin to speak and to listen, to connect and to relate. We always return to each other. We find some help in each other.

There is, it seems, in human life, an eternal, perennial return to origins. The origin of social life is, perhaps, that in relating we fend off the paralyzing force of anxiety. In relating, we find the heart to go on.

Back we go, then, to the beginning.

Together.

Know this: The anxiety that has disrupted our lives from September 11 onward is, though perhaps shockingly fresh and particularly intense, not a new experience.

The truth is that living and learning and relating produce anxiety. By their very nature, these most fundamental human endeavors disrupt our routines, our understandings, and our relationships.

We change.

We do not know what lies before us. We never do.

So we live with anxiety: Uncertainty, disruption, loss of stability.

So, perhaps, we must embrace the anxiety of Being. At the very least, acting out of such a commitment, we cannot help but bring about a measure of change in our collective orientation to the matters at hand.

Perhaps we learn to live in an Age of Anxiety by going toward it, by leaping into the anxious universe of possibility—the infinity that stands beyond the ordinary, the everyday, the taken-for-granted.

Perhaps we must just walk forward, head on, into the new worlds that erupt in encounter, in living, in learning, in relating.

And perhaps we learn to live in this new age by engaging new ways of relating to others, especially to those others who are strangers to us.

Perhaps we had better learn how to relate in new ways to these others who see us as the enemy.

Perhaps we had better learn a bit about Islam and its followers.

Perhaps we had better, as my student suggested, try to figure out why some people hate us enough to want us dead.

Perhaps we had better learn how to speak and to listen across chasms of difference.

Life itself—despite our best efforts to control the uncertainty—is anarchic, disruptive, unpredictable.

But perhaps—and this represents our best hope for the future—anxiety can also serve as the fire in the crucible that lights the spark of our collective creativity.

Perhaps together we can plunge headlong into the Age of Anxiety and forge new ways of relating that will bring an end to the horror.

Perhaps together we can, at last, embrace “the courage to be.” Perhaps. . . .

NOTES

1. I later learned that this student’s aunt worked in the World Trade Center. Thankfully, she survived.
2. Two days later, she told me her employer was “reevaluating” her employment. She is suffering; I do not know what to say. So I listen. Eventually, she decides to seek counseling, as her problems, it turns out, are large and overwhelming.
3. One student stood and made an impassioned plea for donations; already, she was thinking of the children of slain office workers in New York and had organized a small campaign to buy a small measure of comfort for these kids. In one day, she collected more than five hundred dollars; by the next day, a shipment of teddy bears was on its way to New York.
4. A young Jewish student stormed angrily out of the room at this moment: The remark apparently was interpreted as a strike at U.S. foreign policy toward Israel. It was all too easy to dismiss his reaction as hotheaded; it takes a little deeper examination to come to understand it; it takes even deeper probing to come to understand the multiple layers of truths contained in this little burst of dissensus. In any event, it lit the fire of classroom dialogue.

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